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Oscar Wilde as a Shakespeare Critic

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Abstract. Oscar Wilde is not generally rated very high as a Shakespeare critic. His Shakespeare criticism apparently strikes us as witty but superficial. But if we read it very seriously we will be convinced that it is insightful. Although Wilde disliked bardolatry, he used Shakespeare as a touchstone of greatness. We also owe to him some brilliant interpretations of Shakespearean characters and style. But what accounts for his distinction as a Shakespeare critic is the emphasis on the accuracy of costume and scenery in the staging of a Shakespeare play. The essay also seeks to investigate why Wilde, who is well-known for his opposition to realism in art, prefers realism in the theatre, especially in the mounting of a Shakeaspearen play.

Keywords: Interpretation, Archaeological accuracy, Illusion of reality

Oscar Wilde is not generally rated high as a Shakespeare critic. Neither F. E. Halliday in his *Shakespeare and His Critics* nor Augustus Ralli in his monumental *History of Shakespeare Criticism* has mentioned his name as a critic of Shakespeare. This is somewhat surprising, for Wilde wrote at least one very long essay exclusively on Shakespeare. The essay—'The Portrait of Mr. W. H.'—is an attempt to cut the Gordian knot of the identity of Mr. W. H. of Shakespeare's sonnets. Although Wilde's reading of some sonnets is quite interesting, we may leave it outside the scope of our present analysis as it is more of a fiction than a serious study of Shakespearean sonnets. This apart, evidence of Wilde's intellectual interface with the Bard of Avon lies scattered over his critical treatises like 'The Decay of Lying' and 'The Critic as Artist', over his review of many contemporary performances of Shakespeare plays, over his letters and in 'The Truth of Masks', an elaborate discussion of the importance of realistic accuracy of costume in the staging of plays in general and Shakespearean plays in particular. Although at first blush Wilde's Shakespeare criticism impresses us as witty but superficial, it is really insightful and hence deserves serious critical attention.

If we are to trust memoirs and recollections, we must conclude that Wilde did not have a very high opinion of Shakespeare (Mikhail I 229); rather he considered Webster as a greater dramatist (Woodcock 134). These representations of Wilde's views are not very convincing because they are flatly in conflict with his own writings where he looks upon Shakespeare as 'the most purely human of all the great artists' (*SL* 206), and 'the greatest figure in the world literature since Greek days' (*SL* 82). He considered it his 'noble privilege' to be 'of the same race as Keats and Shakespeare' (*LOW* 40) and had once defended Zola's sarcastic dig at his 'vulgar language' (English) saying: '*je suis Irlandais de naissance, Anglais de race, et comme le dit M Zola, condamne a parler la langue de Shakespeare*'[1] (Pearson 80). But as a true critic Wilde always disapproved Bardolatry, the 'uncritical admiration' (*PE* 376) for Shakespeare. He not only held that Shakespeare, despite his greatness, 'is not by any means a flawless artist' (*PE* 251) but once wanted to collaborate with Robert Ross in 'rescuing' the Bard of Avon from the morass of thoughtless adulation (*SL* 242).

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As a person Wilde was so steeped in Shakespeare that he would frequently use Shakespearean characters, situations or imagery in illustrating his critical points. For example, while pointing out the advantages of literature compared to the limitations of painting, he says, 'The painter is so far limited that it is only through the mask of the body that he can show us the mystery of the soul. . . . And how inadequately does he do it then, asking us to accept the torn turban of the moor for the noble rage of Othello, or a dotard in a storm for the wild madness of Lear' (*PE* 308). In 'The Soul of Man under Socialism' he distinguishes between the artist's own feelings and those represented in a work of art by referring to *King Lear*: 'The artist is never morbid . . . To call an artist morbid because he deals with morbidity as his subject-matter is as silly as if one called Shakespeare mad because he wrote *King Lear*' (*PE* 377). Also consider his witty comment on the Victorian literary ambivalence which was inclining towards excessive realism but was finding fault with naturalism: 'The nineteenth century dislike of Realism is the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in a glass. The nineteenth century dislike of Romanticism is the rage of Caliban not seeing his own face in a glass' (*CW* 17). What is more strongly suggestive of Wilde's deep appreciation of Shakespeare is apposite citation of Shakespearean phrases in order to sum up a point or define an attitude. For example, borrowing Touchstone's phrase in *As You Like It* (2.4.55) he critiques Meredith's standing as an artist: 'His style is chaos illuminated by flashes of lightning . . . Somebody in Shakespeare—Touchstone, I think—talks about a man, a man who is always breaking his shins over his own wit, and it seems to me that this might serve as the basis for a criticism of Meredith's method' (*PE* 247). Wilde often uses Shakespeare as touchstone for evaluating the art of other writers. In 'The Critic as Artist' he argues that although as a creator of characters Browning 'ranks next to him who made Hamlet', his rhyme is 'misshapen' and language 'ignoble': 'If Shakespeare could sing with myriad lips, Browning could stammer through a thousand mouths' (*PE* 288).

But this is not Shakespeare criticism, for this does not provide us with any new angle for interpretation of Shakespeare's creations. However, if we read Wilde's critical works minutely we may garner a number of revealing comments on Shakespeare that are genuine gems of Shakespeare criticism. It's a pity that these ideas have not been systematically developed by Wilde into a well argued discourse but rather flung at random as off-the cuff comments characteristic of a witty raconteur. For instance, Wilde throws new light on the alleged anachronism of Shakespeare's plays which proceeds from Shakespeare's tendency to telescope his own time into the historical past. The allusion to clocks in *Julius Caesar* or to dollars in *Macbeth* is a matter of detail, and, therefore, does not impair the aesthetic appeal of the play. But as regards general features, Shakespeare, according to Wilde, violates the law of time only where he deals with something universal. The instance that Wilde cites in this context is a masterstroke of Shakespeare interpretation: 'Stupidity he recognizes as being one of the permanent characteristics of all European civilizations; so he sees no difference between a London mob of his own day and a Roman mob of pagan days' (*PE* 352). Wilde's observation on why Shakespeare's writing style changed towards the end of his dramatic career also amply testifies to his critical insight. He links it to the withering effect of realism on English drama and maintains: 'It (*i.e.* the intrusion of Life into the territory of Art) shows itself by the gradual breaking up of the blank-verse in the later plays, by the predominance given to prose, and by the over-importance assigned to characterization' (*PE* 251).

Of all Shakespeare's plays *Hamlet* seems to have drawn most of Wilde's attention. The agony of Hamlet he interprets as the helplessness of a dreamer 'called upon to act': 'He has the nature of the poet and he is asked to grapple with the common complexities of cause and effect . . .' (*SL* 232). To Wilde the insanity of Hamlet is 'a mere mask for the hiding of

weakness. In the making of mows and jests he sees a chance of delay' (*SL* 233). This is clever but not new. But certainly there is a spark of wit when Wilde attempts to disprove the mimetic theory of art by relating the 'feigned' madness of Hamlet to aesthetic imitation: 'this unfortunate aphorism about Art holding the mirror up to Nature is deliberately said by Hamlet in order to convince the by-standers of his absolute insanity in all art-matters' (*PE* 254). His observation on why Hamlet's doubts are *negative*, not the *positive* doubts of a scientist, is revealing indeed: 'He disbelieves in everything including himself, and yet his doubt helps him not, as it comes not from scepticism but from a divided will' (*SL* 233). Wilde's analysis of the characters of Hamlet's friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is brilliant indeed. They are generally considered as minor figures not deserving any critical attention. In his film version of *Hamlet* (1948), Laurence Olivier 'omitted them as unimportant' (Ghosh-Dastidar 4). Before Tom Stoppard's inter-textual re-writing of the episode for his play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1966), hardly any critic found them worth studying. But it is Wilde who in '*Hamlet* at the Lyceum' describes them in a way that is still considered unparalleled. He revealingly notes that they are the only characters 'Shakespeare has not cared to individualize': the one echoes what the other says 'with sicklier iteration' (Weintraub121). It is useless, Wilde maintains in his letter to Douglas, to fault them for their inability to realize the weight of the agony under which Hamlet writhes: 'To censure them would show a lack of appreciation. . . .what Ophelia herself could not understand' is too deep for the interlocked clowns "Guildenstern and gentle Rosencrantz"/ "Rosencrantz and gentle Guildenstern" (*SL* 233).

According to T. S. Eliot, 'To take Shakespeare's work as a whole, no longer to single out several plays as the greatest, and mark the others only as apprenticeship or decline, is . . . an important and positive step in modern Shakespeare interpretation' (Knight xviii). Wilde is a pioneer in this respect, for in 'The Truth of Masks' in making , a plea for accuracy of costume in stage productions, he takes into account the majority of Shakespeare's dramatic works. 'Shakespeare on Scenery', published in *Dramatic Review* on 14 March 1885, contains the seed of 'Shakespeare and Stage Costume' (May 1885), re-named 'The Truth of Masks'. Wilde here contends that as a dramatist Shakespeare protested against two principal handicaps of his stage—'the lack of suitable scenery, and the fashion of men playing women's parts' (Weintraub 117). Wilde then discusses three probable substitutes for scenery: reporting the locale of action, hanging an indexical placard, or poetically reproducing it exactly in the manner a particular time is evoked in a Shakespeare play.[2] Since description is essentially 'un-dramatic', Wilde strongly attacks the misconception that paint hides the passion and scenery kills the sentiment of a play. He rather confidently endorses the importance of scenery and costume in stage representation: 'Theatrical audiences are far more impressed by what they look at than by what they listen to' (Weintraub 117).

'The Truth of Masks' is an important work not only in Wildean critical oeuvre but in Shakespeare criticism in general. At a time when Shakespeare critics were waxing eloquent over the poetry of Shakespeare's plays and the depth of Shakespeare's characterization, Wilde turned his attention from the play to the theatre, from reading to staging. No wonder that the same Wilde, who in 'The Decay of Lying' glorifies art for rejecting truths, here associates aesthetic beauty with 'absolute accuracy of detail'. Although 'The Decay of Lying' (1889) postdates the publication of 'The Truth of Masks' (1885), Wilde's earlier view in this regard stands unchanged. This is clear from the fact that in 'Pen, Pencil and Poison', published in the same month (January 1889), he endorses Wainewright's passion 'for

archaeological accuracy in costume and scene-painting' (*PE* 275). Wilde distinguishes the drama from the theatre because while the former for its perfection waits on the strength of the imagination, the latter requires facts in addition to fiction for representational infallibility. The point has been driven home more convincingly in Wilde's review of *Henry IV*: 'For while we look to the dramatist to give romance to realism, we ask of the actor to give realism to romance' (Weintraub 126). However, the actor cannot give realism to romance unaided; the effect is a joint product of histrionics and stage graphics. Scenery comes under stage graphics. Accuracy in respect of the scenery and costume, therefore, is absolutely essential for an illusion of reality, and Wilde necessarily proceeds to justify the truth of this so called mask.

A quick look at Romantic and Victorian criticism cum production of Shakespeare may help us grasp the importance of Wilde's view regarding accuracy of costume and scenery. The general attitude of the Romantic and Victorian critics to Shakespeare was reverential.[3] They were interested in rhapsodizing over the poetic aura of Shakespeare's plays, the magic charm of words which 'come winged at his bidding' (Halliday 91). Charles Lamb in *On the Tragedies of Shakespeare, considered with reference to their fitness for Stage Representation*, published in 1811, was sceptical about the stage-worthiness of Shakespeare's plays. He held that Shakespeare's plays were 'less calculated for performance on a stage'. He rejected scenery, dress and other visual effects as 'the most contemptible things', the 'non-essentials' which in acting 'are raised into an importance, injurious to the main interest of the play' (Bromwich 70). So strong was their infatuation for the lyric in Shakespeare that they overlooked the fact that Shakespeare's plays had been written principally for 'the stage and the audience in mind, and not the readers' (Biswas 90). Rejecting this premise that Shakespeare is 'more for the study than for the stage', Wilde in a review of '*Henry IV* at Oxford' argues that 'we have no right to alter the form which he himself selected for the full expression of his work'(Weintraub 124).

In most Victorian dramatic reviews the issue of costume and scenery was de-prioritized or focused from the wrong angle. For example, Clement Scott's review of Ellen Terry's Olivia at the Lyceum Theatre is almost a scene-wise analysis of Miss Terry's bewitching acting. But there is not a single appreciative or dismissive mention of the costume used for the play. In a review of Henry Irving's *Hamlet* at the Lyceum Theatre (1874), Scott praises the dress of the Prince of Denmark for its unconventionality: 'no funeral velvet . . . no order of the Danish elephant. We see before us a man and a prince, in thick robed silk and a jacket . . . relieved alone by a heavy chain of gold' (Agate 193). Such a dress, however poetically conceived, is, one fears, far from being dramatically appropriate. Wilde could hardly subscribe to this type of indifference to costume and scenery, the two vital conditions in a playhouse for any illusion of realism. He distances himself from those critics who praise 'the simplicity of the Elizabethan Stage', because they, according to Wilde, 'are lauding a condition of things against which Shakespeare himself, in the spirit of a true artist, always strongly protested' (Weintraub 118).[4]

It was a footnote in Lord Lytton's review of Mary Anderson's performance as Juliet that inspired Wilde to write 'The Truth of Masks'. In his article (December 1884) Lord Lytton connives at scenic anachronism in representation with a bold conviction: 'The attempt to archaeologize the Shakespearean drama is one of the stupidest pedantries in an age of prigs' (qtd. in Shewan 79). E.W. Godwin who had effectively designed scenery and costume in many contemporary productions, disputed Lytton's point in a number of articles that followed the review. Wilde who just two months back had claimed in 'Shakespeare on

Scenery' that 'A noble play, nobly mounted, gives us double artistic pleasure' (Weintraub 117) wrote 'The Truth of Masks' to underpin Godwin's side of the debate. Out to clear up the misconception that 'Shakespeare himself was more or less indifferent to the costume of his actors' Wilde avers that no other English, French or Greek dramatist 'relies so much on the dress of his actors for illusionist effects' as does Shakespeare (*PE* 340). He emphatically notes that Shakespeare appreciated the value of costumes not for adding 'picturesqueness to poetry', but for producing certain dramatic effects. Wilde cites several instances from Shakespeare of how costume can be used as a 'mode of intensifying dramatic situation' (342). For example, Macbeth appears in nightgown after the murder of Duncan, as if just aroused from sleep; Prospero asks for the Duke's hat in place of enchanter's robes, which is suggestive of the transformation of his role from a magician to an administrator. From this premise Wilde draws a conclusion that Shakespeare always writes as a dramatist who had 'at his disposal a most elaborate theatrical wardrobe, and who could rely on the actors taking pains about their make-up' (345).[5] Wilde here offers a corrective to the popular Victorian criticism that whatever Shakespeare wrote was essentially 'unpremeditated'. He rather maintains that to stage a Shakespeare play exactly as he himself wished it to be done 'requires the services of a good property-man, a clever wig-maker, a costumier . . . a master of the methods of making-up' (345). Wilde argues that although otherwise so imaginative, Shakespeare was very fastidious about the clothes of his characters and the green room niceties, because Shakespeare knew that apparel often proclaims the man and costume may be 'a means of displaying character without description' (360).

Wilde next turns to archaeology and makes a prudent distinction between the use of archaeology in other fields of literature and its use in the theatre. Since the theater can exquisitely combine 'the illusion of the actual life with the wonder of the unreal world' (350), the stage aestheticizes the science of archaeology. In a review of the performance of *Twelfth Night* published in *Dramatic Review* (February 1886), Wilde puts it epigrammatically: 'On the stage literature returns to life and archaeology becomes art' (Weintraub 131). Unenlightened by archaeological findings as they were, English producers of older generations had to be content with 'non-descript fancy dress' and tolerate the distressing anachronism of 'a Lear in lace ruffles, and a Lady Macbeth in a large crinoline' (351). Wilde argues that although the aesthetic value of Shakespeare's plays does not depend solely on their facts, the very sight of 'Brutus reclining in a Queen Anne's chair' is against the norm of propriety and as such aesthetically inappropriate. Hence, facts made available by archaeology are to be suitably used in producing Shakespeare plays. Even Shakespeare would have welcomed this much of fact-orientation. To justify his speculation Wilde mentions that in the battle scenes for his history plays the playwright thinks of 'lance and shield', weapons drawn from past ages, and not from the military accoutrement of his own time when armours were rapidly disappearing before fire arms (354).

But, has not Shakespeare himself appealed to us in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to bank less on stage paraphernalia but more on the imagination which can amend all flaws of our productions? [6] Wilde's point here is that continuing the imperfections before which Shakespeare was helpless would be as irrational as 'to have Juliet played by a boy or to give up the advantage of changeable scenery' (355). However, as a staunch critic of naturalism, Wilde maintains that the details must not be 'allowed to usurp the principal place' as happens in the naturalist theatre: 'They must be subordinate always to the general motive of

the play' (355). Fact, a la Wilde, in itself is neither strictly necessary nor absolutely redundant in art. How it is used is most important. Wilde makes this point clear enough when he says

that 'archaeology, being a science, is neither good nor bad, but a fact simply. Its value depends entirely on how it is used, and only an artist can use it' (352). Wilde further notes that 'to produce a sixteenth-century play in fourteenth century attire, or *vice versa* would make the performance seem unreal because untrue' (357).[7] Incidentally, whereas we would describe such anachronistic performance as 'untrue' (= deficient in aesthetic value) because it is 'unreal', Wilde calls it 'unreal because untrue'. The interchange of terms does not seem to be a result of carelessness or inadvertence. This is because in 'The Truth of Masks' Wilde is concerned with how realistic representation can enhance the truth value of art, never, however, shutting his eyes to the general principle that the aesthetic value of plays does not 'depend on their facts, but on their Truth, and Truth is independent of facts always' (353). The clarity of 'Wilde's judgment is evident from the epigrammatic summing up: 'The true dramatist, in fact, shows us life under the conditions of art, not art in the form of life' (357). Showing 'life under the conditions of art' is actually presenting the real with necessary aesthetic transformations, that is, processing the real in 'the mill of the mind' with the help of the creative imagination. On the other hand, showing 'art in the form of life' means surrendering the aesthetic values in order to concede to verisimilitude, that is, to the demands of real life.

In *Shakespeare and His Critics*, F. E. Halliday complains that Henry Irving who produced Shakespeare's plays at the Lyceum 'cut and shuffled the text with increasing abandon' for the sake of 'scenic splendours'. So, his production was 'Shakespeare truncated, transposed, and transformed into visual entertainment' (Halliday 28). The question that stares us in the face here is whether as a critic of Shakespeare Wilde recommends anything that amounts to sacrificing aesthetic grandeur for the sake of scenic splendor. True, Wilde approvingly reviews the re-mounting of *Hamlet* by Irving in 1885; but he also acknowledges that 'it is always dangerous to pause for picturesqueness' (Weintraub 117), or to lure the audience by the loveliness of scenic effect 'into listening to rhetoric posing as poetry, and vulgarity doing duty for realism' (Weintraub 117). So a factually correct dress must be artistically appropriate as well. Otherwise it would always look 'unreal, unnatural, and theatrical in the sense of artificial' (358). To ram the point home Wilde contrasts two contemporary productions of *As You Like It*. In the performance mounted by E.W. Godwin and Lady Archibald Campbell the costume was conceived integrally with the setting. However, the production of the play by Mr. Hare at St. James failed to orchestrate the costume with the setting. Consequently, the effectiveness of Orlando's complaint that he was brought up like a peasant was marred by the gorgeousness of his costume.

In his Appendix to *The Development of the Theatre* (1937) Allardyce Nicoll has observed that it is Wilde's 'The Truth of Masks', and not Chambers' *The Elizabethan Stage* (1923), which must have the credit of being the first thorough analysis of the issue of Elizabethan stage costume. In her article 'Oscar Wilde as a Shakespeare Critic', Jyotsna Bhattacharjee has remarked that Wilde has not written in 'the approved style of 'academic' criticism . . . with the usual paraphernalia, of documentation' (Sen *SCV* 231). This is true, but still it is impossible to dismiss Wilde as 'a dress reformer turned drama critic' in the way William Archer has dumped his criticism in his article in *Dramatic Review* (23 May 1885). It is to be regretted that even great 20th century critics like Wilson Knight harbor misconception regarding the stage fitness of Shakespearean drama. For example, in his 'Prefatory Note' to

The Wheel of Fire Knight observes that his 'experience as an actor, producer, and play-goer' has left him 'uncompromising' in his assertion that 'the literary analysis of a great drama in terms of theatrical technique accomplishes singularly little' (vi). Overlooking the playhouse-constraints that Shakespeare had to work under, even Granville-Barker pronounces an un-drama-critic-like judgment: 'The chief strength of Elizabethan stagecraft lay in its comprehensive use of poetry' (Halliday 256). Wilde's penetrating critical insight as well as the relevance of his views becomes clear to us when his views are placed beside modern masterpieces dealing with the Shakespearean stagecraft.

Notes

1. 'I am Irish by birth, English by race, and, as Mr. Zola says, condemned to speak the language of Shakespeare'.
2. Shakespeare's poetic description has a magic charm of its own. Consider the evocation of the morning: 'But look, the morn in russet mantle clad, / Walks o'er the dew of yon high eastward hill' (*Hamlet* 1.1.171-2) or of the night: 'There's husbandry in heaven; / Their candles are all out' (*Macbeth* 2.1. 5-6) (Proudfoot 294 & 780).
3. Coleridge says, 'Assuredly that criticism of Shakespeare will alone be genial which is reverential. The Englishman, who without reverence, a proud and affectionate reverence, can utter the name of William Shakespeare, stands disqualified for the office of critic' (Halliday 82).
4. In the play within the play *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Shakespeare laughs at the naivety of conventions of contemporary stage where a man 'with lime and rough-cast' represents a wall, and 'a man with lantern, dog and bush of thorn' presents 'moonshine'. That Shakespeare did not approve of these coarse stage-props is clear from Theseus's sarcastic comment: 'the man should be put into the lantern. How is it else the Man i' the Moon?' (Proudfoot 910)
5. Incidentally, modern critics maintain that although lacking in scenery, the Elizabethan stage was notable for the gorgeousness of its costume. A quick survey of the various dress items requisitioned by an Elizabethan manager and mentioned in Henslowe's *Diary* will bear testimony to Charles J Sisson's assertion that the theatres were famous 'for the splendor . . . of the costume of their actors' (Spencer 37), although the costume was not always appropriate for the occasion.
6. 'The best in this kind are but shadows; and the worst are no worse if imagination amend them' (5.1. 209-10).
7. Even the theatre of the absurd cannot invalidate Wilde's proposition here, for there the dress code is consciously defied to evoke a feeling of absurdity, just as in a mock-epic the co-ordination between form and content is deliberately fractured in order to work out a finer cohesion of form and content.

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